

Katrina's children—Still struggling

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Tuesday, 01 September 2009 16:05

"Dear President Obama: My name is Jade Windon, 7th grade student at McDonogh 42 Charter School in New Orleans, Louisiana. Mr. President, I write to you expressing how many of our lives continue to be affected today by the storm that happened almost four years ago. Hurricane Katrina devastated the lives of everyone here and in the Gulf Coast region. Here in New Orleans, we are making very little progress. Our communities are still feeling the effects of Katrina. I ask you Mr. President to please help us rebuild our lives and city. Our school, jobs and health care are just a few of the things that I would like to see fixed. Thank you Mr. President and may God Bless America, especially New Orleans. Sincerely, Jade Windon."

Jade is one of thousands of children from New Orleans and the surrounding areas for whom life is still not back to normal four years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. Even though significant strides toward recovery have been made, for many residents there is still a long way to go. A new report commissioned by the Children's Defense Fund's Southern Regional and Louisiana offices outlines many of the ongoing needs and the lessons for our nation. Three of the most serious problems still facing children and families are housing, health care and education.

Hurricane Katrina displaced approximately one million people. Many families are still struggling to find and afford housing. Many more are worried about possible foreclosure on their homes or the expiration of rental assistance provided by the government, especially in areas where rents have skyrocketed since the storm. Some families are still contesting the decisions of insurance companies and government relief programs to deny housing assistance or aid to rebuild their properties. Others who are still living in FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers while waiting for their homes to be rebuilt are facing local community ordinances demanding they move out because the trailers are seen as eyesores and magnets for crime. The rebuilding of demolished public housing units also lags far behind the demand for housing and is contributing to a rise in homelessness. It's estimated that more than 250,000 housing units are still unfit for human habitation.

Many hospitals and clinics in the region remain closed including New Orleans' only public hospital. Louisiana ranked 49th in a recent state-by-state study on child well-being and 50th in the percentage of its population lacking access to quality health and mental healthcare. Without serious intervention and a forward-thinking strategy for health and mental health services for children and their families, we can anticipate a worsening of health problems—including conditions like substance abuse, alcoholism, and domestic violence that are all linked to the untreated post-traumatic stress that many storm survivors still face.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, approximately 118,000 school-age children in Louisiana and 20,000 school-age children in Mississippi were displaced. It's estimated that more than 50,000 children did not attend school in 2005-2006, and approximately 15,000 did not attend in 2006-2007. Although the consequences of missed school days and other setbacks in education and child care services haven't been fully assessed, it's clear that the post-Katrina government response has not adequately ensured access to schools and child care centers. Despite the unmet needs, FEMA denied government applications for assistance to rebuild heavily damaged or destroyed child care centers because it does not consider child care an essential public service.

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At the same time, FEMA identified zoos and museums as examples of essential public services eligible for rebuilding assistance, a decision whose rationale defies logic. Even before Katrina, the New Orleans school system was in a state of serious decline. The storm's damage to approximately 100 public school buildings facilitated the takeover of failing schools and the drive to make New Orleans the first majority charter school district in the nation. But the introduction of charter schools hasn't remedied the educational inequalities, the increased need for counseling services, or the unstable living conditions many students face. What exists now is a system of schools—not a school system worthy of its children.

Despite a litany of seemingly insurmountable human conditions and problems, there are some glimmers of hope. There is a tremendous activism led by Gulf Region residents to address many of the issues that plagued their communities before Hurricane Katrina. This activism is supported by people and organizations from across the United States and abroad, all of whom have stepped into the void of governmental leadership and the continuing failure of government to have a prescribed standard of care for recovery for all of its citizens. But there shouldn't be a void. Four years after our nation expressed shock and horror that so many poor and Black citizens had been left behind during the storm, many Americans probably assume the crisis has been solved. Instead, the slow recovery continues and is still leaving many of the same children and adults behind. Our nation can and must do better.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>.